

The Patriot: The Exclusion of the Hero Full of Character

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Lima Barreto was born in Rio de Janeiro on May 13, 1881, the day that in 1888 slavery would be abolished in Brazil. He was a *pardo*, as mulattoes were registered at the time, and was given the name of a Portuguese king: Afonso Henriques. He died at the end of 1922, the same year as the Week of Modern Art, while quarreling with the São Paulo modernists whom he considered to be futurists and followers of “the charlatanisms of Marinetti,” a poet who irritated him primarily for praising war.¹ Upon receiving from Mário de Andrade the recently released magazine *Klaxon*, it seemed to Lima Barreto that the Fascism of the young Italian writer had been compounded with an absolutely unforgivable taste for Americanism in these intellectuals. Politically, he was opposed to Modernism, and Lima Barreto was answered with an unforgiving attack from the strongest movement in Brazilian literature. Thus, he died excluded from a Modernism that he himself had anticipated. Literary history, for lack of a better label, has called him “pre-modernist.” He remains betwixt and between, an *almost*, which is a function of his peripheral biography.

As a mulatto, he was sufficiently white to enroll in a racist and prejudiced university. Although he almost received his undergraduate degree, he was expelled before graduating. He was too black to enter the Brazilian Academy of Letters on either of his two justified attempts. White enough to practice journalism, he was too black to challenge the owner of the newspaper where he began his career. After the publication of his first novel, *Recordações do Escrivão Isaias Caminha*, which strongly criticizes the powerful men of the press, the then powerful *Correio da Manhã* declared a complete boycott of his work. His status as a poor mulatto, a resident of the suburbs of the capital of

the First Republic (1889-1930), clinched his definite preference for *Marginália*, as he entitled one of his volumes of short stories and chronicles.²

The conflict that arose during this period of the First Republic between Lima Barreto and the pillars of Literature—the proprietors of cultural power—had two faces. On the one hand, it isolated his novelistic production from the moment of publication, and on the other, made it very peculiar. The elitist and Parnassian-oriented criticism denied him a legitimating discourse, while his peripheral status preserved it. Lima Barreto emerged as an independent intellectual at a moment when the coopting of intellectuals by the dominant military power structure was common.³ Free from any ties that would have linked his production to the State or to any other legitimating political forces, he would relentlessly criticize the very foundations of the First Republic—patriotism and the prevailing warlike conception of the nation, scientism, racism supported by a dangerous form of Darwinism, and finally, the nationalism which in Latin America gave rise to populism.

In 1909, Lima Barreto personally financed the publication of *Recordações do Escrivão Isaias Caminha*, having it edited in Portugal. According to Lima Barreto himself, the book was written to assert his opposition to the Parnassian formal and pedantic literature. In a letter to the art critic and novelist Gonzaga Duque, Lima Barreto asserts that the book was “intentionally poorly written, at times brutal, but always sincere. I very much hope it will scandalize and displease” (*Correspondência* 169). The third and most important of his novels, *Triste Fim de Policarpo Quaresma* (*The Patriot*, 1911), was initially published in serial installments in the *Jornal do Comércio*. Neither his novels nor the magazine *Floreal*, which he edited during its four editions, brought him recognition, though *Policarpo* received some positive reviews. The First World War and the Russian Revolution defined his political positions: in favor of anarchism, sympathetic to bolshevism, and in strict defense of the universal right to full citizenship.

Triste Fim de Policarpo Quaresma was published as a book in 1916, also at the expense of the author himself. The character Policarpo Quaresma is a bureaucrat from Rio de Janeiro, then the national capital, who is determined to know and value Brazil’s true national identity, to save the immense but abandoned interior of the country, to defend the Brazilian flag, to assert national values, and to fight for the Republic.

In the first part of the novel, Policarpo attempts to assert the legitimacy of Tupi-Guarani as the authentic Brazilian language by writing a document in the

Indigenous language. He is consequently considered insane, and committed to the National Asylum. The narrative highlights the system of favor that runs the country, the ornamental nature of culture, and the “bovarism” of the character.

“Quaresma is crazy.”...

“Nothing else could be expected,” doctor Florencio said. “Those books, that mania for reading...”

“I’d go so far as to say that having books should be forbidden to those who don’t have an academic degree,” Genelício said. “That way these disasters could be avoided... That Quaresma might have been okay, but he went and got involved with books... That’s it! Me, I haven’t picked up a book in forty years (...).” (*Triste Fim* 77,78)

After leaving the insane asylum, he decides that the salvation of Brazil can be found in the countryside. Belief in the land where “through planting all is provided,” as Pero Vaz de Caminha said in the letter relating the discovery of the new land to the King of Portugal, is in accordance with a belief in the certainty of scientific methods. But ants and *coronelismo* (the dictatorship of large landholders) defeat him. Still, he designs a land reform project that he delivers to the president. The response that the president gives him concludes the second part of the book: “You, Quaresma, are a visionary.”

Soon afterwards, the nation appears to be in danger. Facing the “Revolt of the Armada”—sailors subjected to sub-human conditions serve as a pretext for the republican conflict—it is necessary for Policarpo to leave the countryside to fight alongside the “Marechal de Ferro,” Floriano Peixoto, the fool who was made president through authoritarian measures. The *pátria* (“fatherland”), with all the dangerous connotations that this concept can assume, emerges for Quaresma as the great utopia for which he should struggle. Yet again this common man addresses the authorities. At the end of the book, when the humble rebels are condemned to death, the point of view of the main character contaminates that of the narrator:

He couldn’t contain himself. That lot of ill-fated poor fellows leaving that way, at such an unreasonable time, for a distant carnage. He had expressed all of his feelings, placed his moral principles before their eyes; he had challenged their moral courage and their human solidarity; and he had written the letter with vehemence, passion, and indignation. (*Triste Fim* 284)

Lima Barreto struggled against the ultra-nationalist trend of the intellectuals of the First Republic—born out of a military coup d'état—, which he viewed as “the regime of corruption. All opinions must, for whatever type of compensation, be established by the powerful of the moment,” (*Marginália* 78) critiquing patriotism in a manner uncommon for the beginning of the century.

The novel ends with the disenchantment of the defeated patriot Policarpo Quaresma, who perceives everything too late, already en route to his own death:

The fatherland I sought was a myth; it was an apparition created inside his cabinet. There was neither the physical, nor the intellectual, nor the political that I thought existed. (*Triste Fim* 285)

The theme continues in an absolutely novel way for an era in which no one had even begun to think that the nation could be an “imagined community” or that the defense of territories and borders could draw the entire world into generalized fratricidal wars with other inhabitants of the same territories, even within the Europe thought to be the core of civility and the bastion of the practice of citizenship.

In a chronicle published in the magazine *Careta*, later collected with others from the same period in *Coisas do Reino do Jambom*, Lima Barreto astutely linked the dangers of nationalism to those of racism:

... the State's charlatans, in the name of the Fatherland and of the stupid theory of races, instilled aggressive warlike feelings in the ignorant masses... The fatherland is a religious idea belonging to a religion that died a long time ago... In regards to race, the reproducers of the stupid German racial theories are completely lacking the most elementary notions of science, if not, they would clearly know that race is an abstraction. (*Coisas do Reino* 75)

It was 1914, and the world was entering into its first great war. In a 1919 chronicle, Lima Barreto would continue with the same conviction:

Not being a patriot, and actually desiring the weakening of the sense of fatherland, an exclusive and even aggressive feeling, in order to permit the strengthening of a larger unit that would encompass, with the land, the entire human species... (*Marginália* 78)

After 1917, difficulties with the publication of his novels led him to intensify his activities as a journalist, as a collaborator on not very sophisticated illustrated magazines, and as an episodic chronicler in newspapers and magazines such as *O País* and *Diário de Notícias*. He also worked as an editor of critical publications such as *Careta*, progressive ones such as *ABC*, and anarchist ones including *A Voz do Trabalhador* and *O Debate*. These smaller and more radical publications were always short-lived, being shut down rapidly by the police in that fragile democracy. Given the context of the time, the author opted for satire and published *Crônicas sobre a República das Bruzundangas* and *Coisas do Reino do Jambom*.

It was as if the defeat of the visionary Major Quaresma, who is shot dead by the dictator at the end of the book, had brought the author to abandon the more formal standards of a seriously critical literature. He was left with satire, as traditional criticism generally classifies these writings. I prefer to see them as parody, in an intertextual context in which his work contests texts such as *Contos Pátrios* by authors of high Parnassian literature like Coelho Neto and Olavo Bilac, or *Por que me Ufano do meu País*, by the deservedly forgotten Conde Afonso Celso. Lima Barreto created parodies of official history, of the heroic tales of republican memory.

The author attained the greatest visibility in his newspaper chronicles, making this a permanent activity until the end of his life and the vehicle through which he would seek to play a role in city life. But the chronicle, as we know, was for a long time considered a “lesser genre.” The chronicler is an artist who is pursued by *chronos*, always driven by the need to continue forward, with no time to look back. The circumstances of speed and professional obligation characteristic of the modern chronicle lead to the choice of a pleasant colloquiality that makes the reader an accomplice. These conditions of production and the chronicle’s direct link to the vehicle in which it circulates, the newspaper—which can be read today and used to wrap fish tomorrow, as they said during the time when fish were still wrapped in newspaper—bring imperfections, eventual errors (like those caused by the fact that chroniclers always cite from memory), and the presence of contradictions. Being contradictory and polemical is often a characteristic of the chronicle itself. However, its fragmentary aspect is the most interesting, linking it to other less *noble* and consecrated literary genres such as memoirs, testimonies, and diaries. There is a little of all of these genres in the literary chronicle, including the possibility to publicly assume the defense of the

downtrodden and offended. The chronicler in Brazil does exactly this in real campaigns such as the defense of women assassinated by their husbands or lovers: “Let women love as they wish. Don’t kill them, for the love of God;” of striking laborers: “The workers that are about to protest to their bosses and the government about the living conditions imposed on them have acted prudently and with saints’ patience until now;” or of anarchist militants, Spaniards and Italians threatened with deportation: “the anarchists talk about humanity to humanity, about humankind to humankind, and not in the name of the small abilities of political figures.”⁴

The writer who had allied himself with peripheral genres rejected by defenders of “high literature” was, at that time, himself one of those excluded from Rio society. In 1917, Lima Barreto wrote in his personal diary: “I was going downtown, when I began to feel ill, I had been drinking all month, mostly *parati*.⁵ Drink after drink, admitted or not. Eating little and sleeping God knows how. I was disgusting, filthy” (*Diário* 193). Alcohol, the poverty reflected in his clothing, living far from downtown—all these factors led to his construction of that *exile in the city*, obsessively adopted as a theme in all of his work.

The image of this man, who crossed the city daily and at the end of the day wrote his chronicle, was strangely opposed to that of his professional colleagues: “I’m not that type of model and I know I irritate the elevated spirits of intellectual puppets.” Occasionally, however, the writer assumed this role with a kind of arrogance, as in the chronicle in which he wrote: “and don’t be offended by my worn out attire, because this is my elegance and my charm” (*Bagatelas* 138). Rejection from contemporary legitimating literary sources could only have produced rebelliousness such as that beautifully and painfully expressed in a chronicle from the early part of his career: “I want to be a writer because I wish to and I am ready to assume the life and the place toward which I am headed. I burned my ships, I left everything, everything, for the stuff of letters.”⁶

Alcoholism would lead Lima Barreto into the strongest of all exclusions: the exclusion of insanity. Life imitates art. Before writing *Triste Fim de Policarpo Quaresma*, his contact with insanity was through accompanying the mental illness that also affected his father. Lima Barreto was committed to an asylum for the first time in 1914. Since *Policarpo Quaresma* was not published until 1916, many critics see traces of Lima’s biography in the insanity of the character. This was not true, or at least it wasn’t yet. A fear of mental illness was present—the dread that, according to the deterministic

principles prevalent at the time, he would be guaranteed the same fate as his father. The fact is that the description of Policarpo's stay at the asylum is as moving as the one he would write about his own stay at the "Praia de Saudade"⁷ in his unfinished novel *Cemitério dos Vivos*:

Other visitors came on the streetcar and none of them delayed in getting off at the door of the asylum. As at all the doors of our social hells, there were all types of people, of many conditions, origins, and fortunes. It is not only death that levels; insanity, crime, and disease all raze the distinctions we invent. (*Triste Fim* 99)

On Christmas Eve 1919, Lima Barreto was taken a second time to the "National Asylum for the Alienated," a difficult stay from which he would never have time to recover. On his intake form, the psychiatrist of the Pinel Section of the Hospital wrote a curious history of his disease, transcribed in Francisco de Assis Barbosa's important biography of Lima Barreto:

Perfectly oriented in time, place and medium, he immediately confesses to excessively using *parati*, which he understood to be a very damaging addiction; however, regardless of great efforts, he cannot manage to give the drink up... An individual of intellectual culture, *he calls himself a writer*, having published four novels, and he is currently a collaborator on *Careta*. (Barbosa 356-357, my emphases)

In order to make his internment coherent, and despite his cultured traits place him in the ward with the most wretched patients for three months, it was necessary to put into question the work of that citizen gone crazy—as if his declaration of being a writer were part of his delusion. In the situation in which he found himself then, he was left with the only radical reaction to the accusation of insanity: the assertion of his own words. Lima Barreto began to make notes in which he sought to salvage his own individuality, looking to save the humiliated man. He wrote one of the strongest and most moving documents in defense of the citizenship of the most excluded citizens: the mentally ill. He wrote the *Diário do Hospício* [*Asylum Diary*], his chronicle of insanity. At this time, he felt close to the great writers of the Western canon. At the beginning of the *Diário* he wrote:

... he made me wash the patio, clean the bathroom, where he gave me an excellent shower with a whip. We were all naked, with the doors open, and I was

very timid. I remembered Dostoyevski's steam baths in *House of the Dead*. When I washed, I cried; but I remembered Cervantes, Dostoyevski himself, who probably suffered more. (*O Cemitério* 24)

Lima Barreto's last novel, *Clara dos Anjos*, finished in January of 1922, was a lifelong project that was very difficult for him to finish. It ends with a comment from its main character, a young, poor, mulatta, suburban woman, who was deflowered by a young white man: "We aren't anything in this life" (*Clara dos Anjos* 196).

Mikhail Bakhtin says that, "an author is a prisoner of his time, of his contemporaneity. Later eras free him from this prison and literary scholars should aid in this liberation" (Bakhtin 350). However, in order for Bakhtin's assertion to help us, we need to understand that for him literature is an inalienable facet of culture and cannot be understood outside the context of all culture. The most intense and productive cultural life emerges from the interstices between its different zones and not when these zones close around their individual specificities, as Bakhtin asserted in a 1970 interview with the magazine *Novy Mir*.

When he died, Lima Barreto left a large portion of his work unpublished, in the form of a book. He left it carefully prepared for publishing, with the chronicles in volumes, almost all with titles. It remained for the historian and literary critic Francisco de Assis Barbosa to publish the almost complete set of work—twenty-seven volumes—in 1956. On this occasion, the diaries, correspondence, and chronicles were made accessible to the reading public. However, twenty more years were still necessary for the academy to become interested in the author in a more positive way, and it was only after the 1980s that Lima Barreto began to be considered an important figure in the Brazilian literary arena.

It is interesting to observe that what occurred in this short time was a transformation of the theoretical understanding of what comprises literature, introducing a critical pluralism necessary for a new literary history.

Lima Barreto's literature was always condemned to its era by the same pretext: the lack of literary refinement, for being *careless* writing, for too *lazy* a syntax, for, in other words, not meeting the norms of high literature. Today, as a result of the critical attention it receives and, above all, because it is frequently adapted for the theater and film, his work is achieving the objectives of its author: to reach large masses of users, newspaper readers,

readers of chronicles or satiric texts. This desire to speak to and for the subaltern sectors of society is what made him the “itinerant libertarian who was extinguished by fate under the barbarism of the tropics,” as Antônio Arnoni Prado calls him (13).

We return to the title of the novel. In the anticipatory “*triste fim*” that inverts the narrative’s order, the very impossibility of Policarpo Quaresma’s heroism full of character is recognized from the beginning—a thesis definitively confirmed when Mário de Andrade created the anthropophagic character Macunaíma, the “characterless hero.”

Notes

¹ In 1922, Mário de Andrade, through Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, sent an issue of *Klaxon* to Lima Barreto. However, Lima immediately disliked the title of the magazine, writing in the Rio de Janeiro-based magazine *Careta*: “those young men really believe that we do not know what futurism is? For more than twenty years it is a widespread subject, and it is not possible to read the cheapest French or Italian journal without being informed of the latest boast of ‘Il Marinetti.’” (*Careta*, July 22, 1922).

² The Portuguese term *crônica* refers to a type of short composition related to current events or social reality that is usually published in a newspaper or magazine. (Translator’s note)

³ For more details, see Resende, “Lima Barreto.”

⁴ Estas crônicas estão estudadas em Resende, *Lima Barreto*.

⁵ *Parati* is a type of *cachaça*, Brazilian sugarcane liquor.

⁶ A moving statement, written in a chronicle when he was 30 years old, and published in the newspaper *Gazeta da Tarde*, June 28, 1911. He repeated this statement throughout his life.

⁷ This is a name given to *Praia Vermelha* in that era, an area in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro where the National Asylum was located.

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